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# **Moderating Role of Work Withdrawal on Incidental Customer Mistreatment— Emotional Exhaustion Relationship**

Yumeng (Brad) Yue

*University of Edinburgh Business School*

Helena Nguyen

*University of Sydney Business School*

Markus Groth

Stephen Frenkel

*UNSW Business School*

Anya Johnson

*University of Sydney Business School*

Previous research suggested that frontline service employees (FLEs) exhibit a natural tendency to withdraw from their tasks following customer mistreatment, in various forms such as reducing effort, being absent from worksite, and taking sick leave (Shao & Skarlicki, 2014; Sliter, Sliter, & Jex, 2012). However, whether these withdrawal behaviors benefit employees' wellbeing and performance is not established. Bearing the question in mind, in this paper we examined the moderating role of various withdrawal behaviors on the relationship between incidental customer mistreatment and employees' emotional exhaustion.

More specifically, in this paper we conducted two studies to examine the aforementioned research question. In Study 1, we drew a sample of parking officers and examined their lagged reaction towards customer mistreatment events. In addition, we also confirmed the role of their job avoidance as a resource replenishing strategy, which mitigate the relationship between customer mistreatment and emotional exhaustion. In Study 2, we extend based on Study 1's finding and examine replenishing potential of other withdrawal strategies in a different working context. More specifically, by drawing a sample of senior nurses, we focused on the replenishing potential of two withdrawal strategies: taking short break and reducing effort.

## **THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT AND HYPOTHESES**

In this paper, we examine employees' intrapersonal fluctuations of their emotional exhaustion level following customer mistreatment incidences. Following previous research

(Rafaeli et al., 2012; Rupp & Spencer, 2006), we first argue that customer mistreatment temporarily heightens employees' feeling of emotional exhaustion because it drains their cognitive and regulatory resources. More importantly, such feeling of exhaustion will be enduring and can be potentially carried over into FLEs' subsequent work.

*Hypothesis 1: Customer mistreatment incidents at a specific time are positively related to employees' momentary levels of emotional exhaustion at a later point of time.*

### **Study 1: Job Avoidance by Parking Officers**

In this study, we investigate an understudied group of service employees — parking officers. Parking officers are employed by government councils and are responsible for enforcing parking regulations. Since parking officers are different from typical FLEs in their nature of job, we conducted several one-on-one interviews and focus groups in order to figure out their typical withdrawal strategies at work. A common theme emerged from all these interviews and observations is that parking officers constantly use task avoidance as a withdrawal strategy.

We argue that job avoidance performed by parking officers should serve a replenishing function and mitigate the relationship between customer mistreatment incidences and emotional exhaustion. As previous research suggested, being temporarily away from work allows employees to reduce their anxiety and replenish energy, thereby neutralizing fatigue (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015; Trougakos, Beal, Green, & Weiss, 2008). Parking officers may choose to engage in various recovery activities during job avoidance, such as drinking water, taking snack and napping, which refills their energy and help alleviate exhaustion resulting from customer mistreatment (Gailliot et al., 2007). In addition to recovery activities, these officers may also engage in casual social activities (e.g. chatting) during break, which distract them from the incivility event and prevent them from constantly ruminating about their negative experiences (Wang et al., 2013).

*Hypothesis 2: The relationship between customer mistreatment incidences and parking officers' emotional exhaustion is weakened when these officers engage job avoidance.*

All parking officers employed by two large Australian metropolitan councils were invited to participate in our two-phase study. In phase one, all participants were asked to complete a baseline paper-and-pencil survey containing demographic measures.

Approximately four weeks later, in phase two of the study, experience sampling data were obtained via an electronic survey which was programmed into the personal digital assistants (PDAs). The sample for Study 1 consisted of 41 parking officers with matching baseline survey data and experience sampling data. In total, all 41 participants provided 1229 incidental surveys, with each participant having completed an average of 29.98 surveys.

### **Results of Study 1**

In order to test Hypothesis 1, we first regressed time  $t+1$  emotional exhaustion on time  $t$  customer mistreatment. Customer mistreatment has a significantly positive effect on emotional exhaustion ( $b = 0.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported. In order to test Hypotheses 2, we formed the interaction terms between time  $t$  customer mistreatment and time  $t+1$  job avoidance. The interaction between customer incivility and job avoidance has a significantly negative effect on emotional exhaustion ( $b = -0.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The simple slope test reveals that the effect of customer mistreatment on emotional exhaustion is significantly positive when job avoidance is low (simple slope =  $0.13$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and it is not significant when job avoidance is high (simple slope =  $0.03$ , n.s.). Thus, Hypothesis 2 is supported.

### **Study 2: Taking Breaks/Reducing Effort by Senior Nurses**

While withdrawal can take many forms, in Study 1 we only focused on one type of such withdrawal which allows parking officers to leave their work site and engage in recovery activities. Furthermore, it is also not clear whether findings derived from parking officers, which represent a group of non-typical FLEs, can be generalizable to other

occupations. Bearing these two issues in mind, we conducted Study 2 which aims at 1) establishing generalizability of Study 1's finding by testing Hypothesis 1 in a different service context; 2) exploring the replenishing potential of other possible withdrawal strategies.

First, we focus on whether FLEs would feel less emotional exhaustion if they take a short break after encountering customer mistreatment. From a resource perspective, we predict that taking breaks should be adaptive in the short term, and serve a replenishing function. Just like job avoidance for parking officers, taking breaks should allow FLEs to leave their work site and engage in recovery activities. Therefore, we believe taking breaks should be able to mitigate the relationship between customer mistreatment and FLEs' emotional exhaustion.

*Hypothesis 3a: The relationship between customer mistreatment incidences and FLEs' emotional exhaustion is weakened when these FLEs take breaks.*

Another form of withdrawal FLEs may exhibit after customer mistreatment is by continuing working but reducing effort. In many scenarios FLEs may feel compelled to work even after being mistreated by a customer. In such cases, they may withdraw in a more covert form by reducing their effort put into serving customers (e.g. Shao & Skarlicki, 2014). We believe reducing effort can not serve a similar replenishing function as taking breaks because employees do not have opportunities to engage in recovery activities. Ironically, we believe the strategy of reducing effort may even backfire and aggravate FLEs' feeling of emotional exhaustion after customer mistreatment. Reducing effort is normally related to poorer service quality and sometimes cause service failure. Therefore, FLEs who put in less effort into their work may end up inviting more dissatisfaction and even incivility from other customers.

*Hypothesis 3b: The relationship between customer mistreatment incidences and FLEs' emotional exhaustion is aggravated when these FLEs reduce their job effort.*

Senior nurses working for a local hospital in Australia were invited to participate to our study. Similar to Study 1, Study 2 was also implemented with a two-phase design, with a one-off survey measuring basic information followed by experience sampling surveys measuring all the incidental variables. The experience sampling period lasted two consecutive weeks, during which participants were asked to complete a survey three times per day. The sample for Study 2 consisted of 57 senior nurses with matching baseline survey data and experience sampling data. Similar to Study 1, we paired customer mistreatment data measured at a particular incident with withdrawal and emotional exhaustion data from its subsequent incident. This process results in a total of 813 paired cases, with each participant provided 14.26 paired cases on average.

### **Results of Study 2**

In order to test Hypothesis 1, we first regressed time  $t+1$  emotional exhaustion on time  $t$  customer mistreatment. Customer mistreatment has a significantly positive effect on emotional exhaustion ( $b = 0.25$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported. In order to test Hypotheses 2a and 2b, we formed the interaction terms between time  $t$  customer mistreatment and time  $t+1$  withdrawal behaviors (i.e., taking break and reducing effort). The interaction between customer mistreatment and taking break has a significantly negative effect on emotional exhaustion ( $b = -0.12$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and the interaction between customer mistreatment and reducing effort has a significantly positive effect on fatigue ( $b = 0.07$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). A simple slope test reveals that the effect of customer mistreatment on emotional exhaustion is significantly positive when taking break is low (simple slope = 0.33,  $p < 0.05$ ) and it is not significant when taking break is high (simple slope = 0.16, n.s.). On the other hand, the relationship between customer mistreatment and emotional exhaustion is stronger when reducing effort is high (simple slope = 0.28,  $p < 0.01$ ) rather than when it is low (simple slope = 0.21, n.s.). Thus, both Hypothesis 2a and 2b are supported.

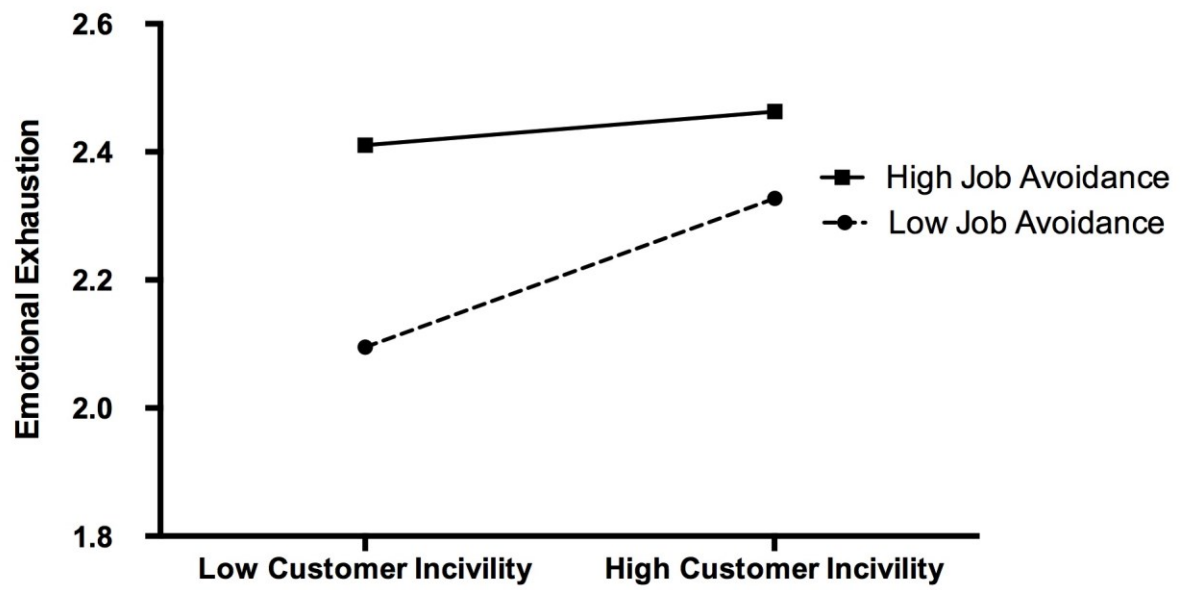


Figure 1: The interaction effect between customer incivility and job avoidance on emotional exhaustion (Study 1)

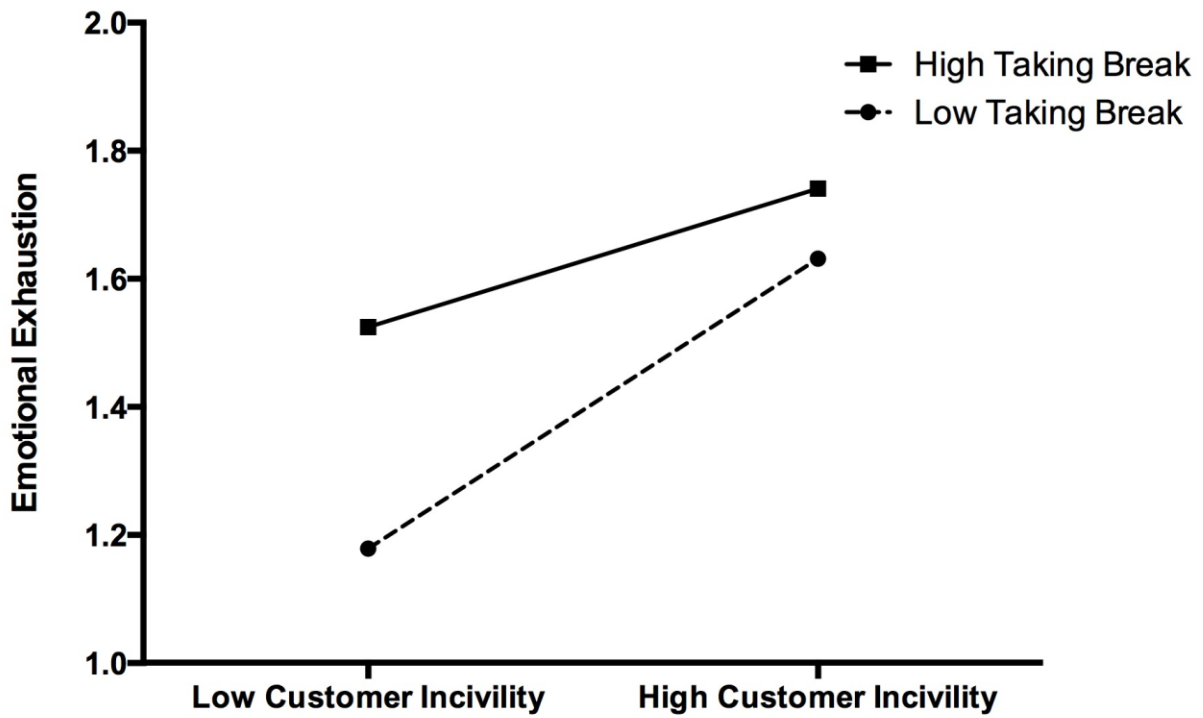


Figure 2: The interaction effect between customer incivility and taking break on emotional exhaustion (Study 2)

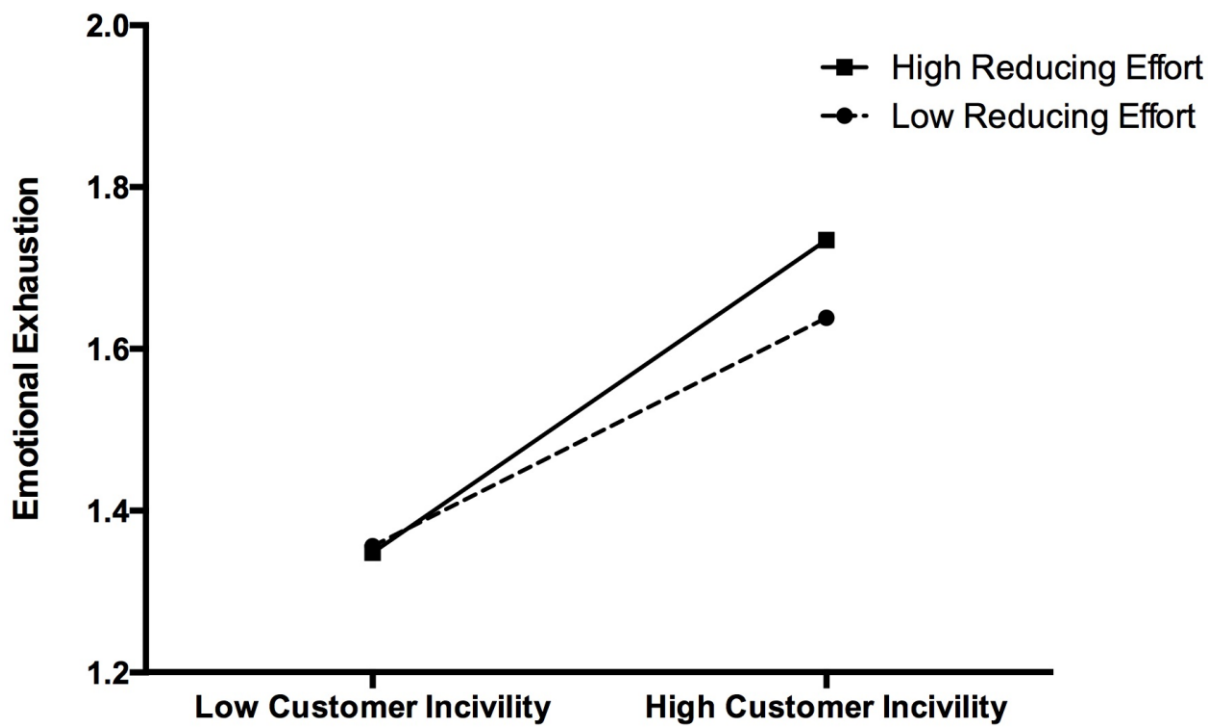


Figure 2: The interaction effect between customer incivility and reducing effort on emotional exhaustion (Study 2)